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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Rockland Community College (New York) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The Task Force on College Pluralism and Identity, appointed in 1990, has made a number of significant recommendations which were adopted as College policy. Primary goals of the action plan included engaging in a series of activities to review and revise the courses in American history and literature and to develop a new inter-disciplinary, team-taught course in Latino/a culture. Accomplishments of the program included: revised Learning Activity proposals; a proposal for an interdisciplinary team-taught course on Latino studies; a colloquium on a novel by a Latina feminist; and hosting a live, national call-in video teleconference. None of the activities have yet reached the classroom, although the concept of "conversation" between cultures was discussed at meetings. Problems with team-teaching arising from budget constraints and competition from other multicultural courses are anticipated. The American Studies Learning Community, being offered in spring 1997, is currently facing the problem of low enrollment. Remaining tasks include modifying overly ambitious plans, developing strategies for offering the Latino course as part of a pluralism requirement next year, creating a workshop on faculty development, and increasing the diversity of library holdings. (HAA)

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Rockland Community College
Exploring America's Communities Progress Report

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

JC 970 118

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PROGRESS REPORT ON 'AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES' AACC GRANT
ROCKLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Preface

Aside from the concrete results described in this report, the greatest benefit of our participation in the AACC "America's Communities" project has been the opportunity for Rockland Community College participants to carve out time from the dispiriting discussions of dropping enrollment, budget constriction and dwindling resources to engage each other in an exploration of critical intellectual, curricular and pedagogical issues.

Through the cooperation of our administration, the team was able to enlist eleven other faculty members to meet with some regularity to discuss, argue, read and workshop together to plan and plot how to best integrate a sense of America's diversity and America's common ground into campus life. We explored issues of voice, identity, community, language, and read THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET by Sandra Cisneros, "Our Next Race Question," Harper's (April 1996), as well as articles on Cuba and the mambo, in order to share various approaches to using such sources in our classrooms. We invited a consultant recommended by our mentor to present two workshops for the project participants and students during the year; we met with students in the Hispanic Club to hear their views on the possibility of Latino/a studies; we participated in an evening of poetry during Spanish Heritage Month. Mostly we talked as colleagues about matters that really count and made plans for the continuation of this dialogue among faculty and students.

We thank the American Association of Community Colleges, particularly Dr. Eleanor Tignor, our mentor, and the Rockland Community College administration, especially Dr. Neal A. Raisman, Dr. Gail Mellow, and Dr. Robert Kahn for pointing us in this direction and for supporting our activities.

Introduction

Rockland Community College, located 35 miles northwest of Manhattan in the suburban town of Suffern, New York, enrolls approximately 6,400 credit students and 4,571 non credit registrations. Since its founding in 1959, the College has grown from its original location in the former county almshouse to a main campus and five extension sites. As the county's population has changed and moved towards more urban demographics, the College has recruited and enrolled significant numbers of minority students and is now truly a multicultural community: 17.9% African American and Haitian, 8.8% Latino/a, 6.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, .4% Native American, 2.2% International Students.

Action Plan

Rockland Community College began a serious engagement with the challenges of pluralism and diversity in 1990. In that year, the President of the College appointed a Task Force on College Pluralism and Diversity. After many months of study, the Task Force made a number of significant recommendations which were adopted as College policy, including a mandated core course in Pluralism and Diversity in America as a graduation requirement. In order to sustain this promising start, the primary goals of our action plan have included a series of activities to review and revise our courses in American history and American literature and to develop a new inter-disciplinary, team-taught course in Latino/a culture. We decided that inclusion of as many faculty as possible was crucial and were able to enlist an additional eleven faculty participants. Thus we were able to divide into subcommittees as well as to work as a committee of the whole.

Accomplishments

In the past year we have been able to reach the goals we established. Attached to this report are copies of our revised Learning Activity Proposals and a new course proposal for an interdisciplinary team taught course on Latino/a Studies. We also, serendipitously, alighted on the idea of an American Studies Learning Community and have made rather thorough plans for initiating a pilot plan in Spring '97.

Our meetings were intensive, task-oriented, and accomplished, our main goals. The two visits of Dr.Liza Fiol-Matta were extremely helpful. During the firstpresentation, she described various aspects of U.S. Latino/a culture; she illustrated her ideas with readings and analyses of modern Latin American literature. Students from a Pluralism and

Diversity in America section also joined us. During her second visit, she critiqued the first draft of our proposed Latino/a course and also reviewed our revised L.A.P. Dr. Eleanor Tignor's visit to campus on November 1, 1996 was far more than a mere formality. She was particularly helpful in clarifying the benefits and problems of erecting and maintaining a Multidisciplinary Learning Community.

Our colloquium on The House on Mango Street sparked sharp discussion about the aesthetic quality of the book and the necessity of approaching new voices in new ways. As one participant noted, "Cisneros, as a feminist and Latina, is interested in portraying community rather than individual" and "thus challenges Western notions of identity.

In October, Rockland Community College served as a local host for the national, live, call-in video teleconference on renewing America's civic life, "From Me to We," and a number of project participants attended the showing. Although they felt that the teleconference was not directly relevant to our curricular development project, they did find the discussion of civic responsibility to be challenging and informative.

None of our activities have yet reached the classroom, although the concept of "conversation" has permeated our meetings. In our revised American literature and history sequences as well as in the new interdisciplinary course, we have projected the idea of seminar, dialogue, small work groups as ways of integrating conversation and building trust. We are developing learning activities that prompt students to confront controversial issues about American pluralism and identity and to discover common meeting ground.

Obstacles

We are uncertain what obstacles we will face in Spring 1998 when we plan to offer the U.S. Latino/a course. We anticipate problems with team-teaching if our budget situation does not improve. We will also be facing serious competition from other multicultural courses that attract students, and hence we will have to develop an energetic recruitment strategy.

The Learning Community which is being offered in Spring 1997 is, at the moment, facing the problem of low enrollment. What were first conceived as possible obstacles to the American Studies Learning Community -- lack of faculty interest and administrative support -- never materialized. So many faculty waited to participate in The Learning Community that we had to develop a process of selection. Also the registrar's office was totally cooperative in developing block scheduling and providing an appropriate

mailing list. The graphics division even designed special return postcards for our mailing. But what we did not recognize was the difficulty of recruiting sophomore level students for a three course, integrated program. Despite our concerted efforts at publicity -- both through a descriptive paragraph in the Spring course schedule and a mailing of 400 letters--we are finding it very difficult to recruit students into a core of 3 sophomore level classes and may have to modify the requirement to register for all three. We are now working on plans to offer less comprehensive coordination among the courses since not all students will be full participants.

Remaining Tasks

As noted above, we are working on modifying our overly ambitious plans for The Learning Community and developing strategies for offering the U.S. Latino/a course next year. We are planning a workshop during the faculty development month of June to share our projects with the total academic community at Rockland Community College. This will include a panel of participants, a media presentation, as well as a report of accomplishments to date. Our aim is to encourage more conversation about American pluralism and identity across campus.

We are also considering developing some of our ideas on the Latino/a course into modules for the required Pluralism and Diversity in America course and several of the accepted alternatives.

We are asking the American literature and history people who have worked with us to conduct workshops for faculty in their disciplines to review the revised Learning Activity Proposals Our object here is to ensure that all sections of the survey courses include pluralism and identity issues.

Finally, the Library is continuing to work closely with us to build a collection of books and videos on Latino/a studies and diversity issues.

Conclusion

The rich and varied composition of our Task Force added much to the ultimate construction of the courses we developed and revised as well as The Learning Community we created. Even our points of conflict were not so much obstacles as opportunities and were probably indicative of the exhilarating conversations that will permeate our classrooms when we address the question:

"What does it mean to be an American?"

An Addendum to Rockland Community College's Progress Report

1. "What does it mean to be American?"

Novelist Amy Tan, in a recent interview on National Public Radio, posited that the felt need to ask this question is quintessentially American. She suggests that this selfconscious questioning of nationality is what distinguishes the American. The Rockland Community College America's Communities committee agrees to the extent that we see the American as someone who traces her origins beyond the national boundaries of the United States and is thus aware of a hyphenated identity; eg. Irish American, African American. We are a "nation of immigrants," as the old textbooks say. Members of our committee agree that diversity is one of the hallmarks of the United States, and agree that, in theory if not practice, we share, under the Constitution, the right to our own individuality, to "equal recognition" (Prettyman xi).

We also considered some values traditionally identified as "American," such as individualism (as opposed to focus on community), patriarchy (as opposed to matriarchy), seeking out the new (as opposed to the customary), youth (as opposed to age); we might also add valuing the rural (as opposed to the urban). We noted that this traditional list is not indicative of the diversity that has been a vital part of the United States since (and before) its inception. The traditional image of "American" is accurate for only a fraction of the population--which is one of the reasons for the development of the field of American Studies, which labors to define "American" in all its many manifestations. Our committee suggests that this list would be more accurate if it includes also those values in parenthesis, which indicate values held dear by many Americans.

2. "What divides us?"

The answers to this question come far more readily: race, ethnicity class (economic and social), sex, gender, education, language (including the notion of close discourse communities), age, politics, religion (including "religious" vs. "non-religious"), region, geography, anger, distrust, fear.

3. "What brings us together?"

This can be answered by repeating the items listed immediately above. Americans seem to most often identify themselves with some sub-set of the general set "American," except perhaps in times of war or other national crises. We don't make our primary identifications with those who look, act, or think differently than we do, which is one of the great challenges that we, as a country, face--that we, as teachers, face. Academe's current interest in pluralism procedes from the recognition that we need to develop our students'--and our own--capacity to interact with "Other" people, and to develop their--and our own--ability to draw connections between diverse subjects. On a more literal, but equally profound, level, our classrooms are meant to impress upon the student the fact that she is responsible to her classmate (as well as to her instructor) in the community that is the campus. (Levine n.p.). One of the lessons education is that knowledge is not a privately held commodity but, rather, a shared wealth. Put another way, knowledge is process, not product. As the medieval visionary Mechtild of Magdeburg wrote, criticizing a certain population of self-satisfied clerics, "Stupidity is sufficient unto itself. Wisdom can never learn enough" (Norris 160).

4. "What do we have in common?"

To expand upon question #1, we would add that we achieve some measure of community through public education, national holidays, place of worship, military service, sporting events. At its worst, however, this feeds into the emerging orthodoxy of "civility," wherein, as Benjamin DeMott has noted, "the leader classes...still any insurgence in a second" (18). The discourse of civility encourages people to focus on changing rude behavior, lest they address the underlying injustice(s) that make people loath to "listen and respect and defer" (DeMott 11). Although members of our committee will certainly want to explore this question in our classrooms, we will do so with the awareness that when a discussion of "women's" issues concludes with vague generalizations about their "universal" nature, our students may justifiably conclude that a discussion about women is not complete until it addresses men. Likewise, we must be wary of drawing hasty, facile conclusions about cross-cultural commonalities, lest we send our students the message that differences: 1) do not exist; 2) do not matter.

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